

## SUN YUNG SHIN, Granted to a Foreign Citizen

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***Granted to a Foreign Citizen.*** Sun Yung Shin. Vancouver: Artspeak, 2020. 58 pp. 978-1-927630-10-5

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Sun Yung Shin's *Granted to a Foreign Citizen* is a book of poetry that explores the author's naturalization as a US citizen and her experience as a transnational and transracial adoptee. The work was commissioned by Godfre Leung as part of his project *Unstately*, which asks its participant artists and their audiences to consider, "How might we productively reimagine where we come from, or are going to?" (p. 3). Shin takes up this question, working from the personal to the global, to interrogate her adoption, the adoption narrative that pervasively exists in Western spaces, and the mechanisms of the international industry that led to it. She pays particular attention to the records that often serve to establish an adopted child's sense of belonging and identity.

Shin introduces these topics through the first poem in the book, a self-interview in which the author answers the typical, tired questions that adoptees often face when they disclose their adoptive identities to new people. She answers by rote – sometimes before her questioning side can even ask – explaining that any knowledge she has of her Korean past comes mostly from paperwork, while also hinting at her darker feelings about her adoption. Toward the end of the poem, she writes, "Q: Do you feel fortunate, you know, lucky to be an American?/ A: Did Frankenstein's monster feel lucky to be resurrected even though he was made from the corpses of several dead men?" (p. 11).

This theme of cobbling together a new body from dead pieces reappears throughout the book. Rejecting the narrative of contented familial completeness and kismet that is so often at the heart of Western adoption narratives, in

“Am I Dead? Or Adopted?” and “Replace a Dead Child,” Shin likens her experience of adoptedness to Cotard’s syndrome, which “comprises any one of a series of delusions that range from a belief that one has lost organs, blood, or body parts to insisting that one has lost one’s soul or is dead.”<sup>1</sup> In this state of living loss, Shin mourns the language, culture, and heritage that her adoption erased from her active memory; she says goodbye to many things that she imagines would have been part of her life had she not been adopted, including by saying, “Goodnight, the (Korean) girl and (Korean) woman I would have been” (p. 47). Identity-making as grieving is an exciting framework through which to view this experience. In “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists’: Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives,” Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, and Devon Mordell argue that “archivists have ethical responsibilities related to their representation of the lives they mediate as well as to the kind of care they provide to the deceased, to their archival traces, and to the living who interact with them.”<sup>2</sup> How does this approach need to change when the deceased and the living are one and the same? And how does this affect the way archivists think about state records in particular?

Shin’s work in *Granted* critiques the personhood that government documents mould into being. Throughout the book, Shin presents blank, unfilled versions of forms such as the Application for Naturalization. Doing so encourages the reader to focus on the diplomatic form of the documents and highlights their unfeeling blankness, which contrasts starkly with the intense feelings of (un)belonging and (un)settlement that she evokes through her poetry. This contrast powerfully demonstrates both the inadequacies of these documents in substantiating the self in an emotional realm and yet their centrality to the subject’s identity.

This is not the first time that Shin has included something akin to a personal fonds in her work as a way of examining how she is expected to understand her place in the world. In her 2016 book *Unbearable Splendor*, she included in one poem a page of her orphan *hojuk*, the family registry created by the adoption agency to document the fact that there was no apparent record of her parentage. Discussing the record in an interview, she says,

1 Anne Ruminjo and Boris Mekinulov, “A Case Report of Cotard’s Syndrome,” *Psychiatry* 5, no. 6 (2008): 28–29, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2695744/>.

2 Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, and Devon Mordell, “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists’: Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 116.

This is modernity, when the state owns our identities through a matrix of cross-referenced and self-referential papers with marks on them. They perform magic, essentially, while pretending to be merely bureaucratic or governmental. They “spell” who I am supposed to be. . . . It makes my former self a stranger to me, one I can never know – in terms of social and familial identity.<sup>3</sup>

This idea of documents forming identity, of prescribing self, is something already being discussed by archival scholars in their calls to recognize administrative records as personal records in the contexts of care leavers. Cathy Humphreys and Margaret Kertesz describe care leavers who have sought documentation of their time in care in order to learn more about their childhoods, noting, “These records take the place of the rich oral history that is available to most people through their families.”<sup>4</sup> Understanding the centrality of these records to the abilities of care leavers and adoptees to acquire and complicate a sense of self can play an important role in archivists’ navigating the relational dimension of their work and enacting a practice of care that best meets these individuals’ needs. As we see in *Granted*, it is not only loss that plays a key role in the author’s investigation of her own identity, embodying death like Frankenstein’s monster, but also the (rigid and sterile) form of the documents that are created to fill those gaps. The records are physical evidence that someone assumed and asserted that those blanks could simply be written over with a new identity, a new family, and a new, uncomplicated life. In “L’Entranger| An Unburial| A Funeral,” Shin writes, “The adoption agency told my parents not to worry about trying to learn Korean because I would learn English quickly. I did. We did” (p. 39).

As archivists begin to respond to calls for a more emotionally just<sup>5</sup> and caring approach to their work, it is vital that we search external literature for depictions of archival encounters in order to better understand the needs of the archives user. Anne J. Gilliland has noted that the current archival structure, which reflects the organization of bureaucratic records, “[fails] to recognize, and

3 “Sun Yung Shin in Conversation with Vi Khi Nao,” *American Microreviews & Interviews*, no. 39 (September 2017), <http://www.americanmicroreviews.com/sun-yung-shin-interview>.

4 Cathy Humphreys and Margaret Kertesz, “Making Records Meaningful: Creating an Identity Resource for Young People in Care,” *Australian Social Work* 68, no. 4 (2015): 497–514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2014.960434>.

5 See, for example, Marika Cifor, “Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9261-5>.

indeed actively submerges the role and interests of the 'ordinary' individual who participates or is the subject of the record, or to acknowledge that they should have rights of appraisal, description, and access to records in which they are co-creators or co-present."<sup>6</sup> To address this, she argues, archivists must consider the atypical and yet vital uses that records subjects require these records for and must actively facilitate these uncommon archival interactions in an emotionally sensitive and critically reflective way. Research in this area is obviously central to efforts to contextualize these experiences and provide recommendations that utilize the language of archival praxis; while we do not all have the opportunity to interview and gain insight directly from individuals, first-hand accounts of alienating archival experiences like Shin's can be incredibly important for our understanding as individual archivists. To experience a book such as *Granted* is to grapple with the visceral imagery, emotion, and experience of someone searching for a self in the archives.

As an adoptee myself, I found that this haunting book did a remarkably effective job of capturing the emotional wrestling that an adoptee must do in considering how much of their life has been structured by naturalization and by the records that make that process official. It also captures the distance between two perspectives of adoption: as a peaceful and happy integration into families (as it is so often painted) and as a source of the internal conflicts that can arise through a recognition of otherness within one's own family. Adoption records not only serve to bring adoptees together with their families, forming linkages that would not exist through blood, but they can also, paradoxically, act as physical reminders of the lack of belonging, because records were required make the family bonds recognized. Shin's book is an elegant opportunity for the interested archivist to explore the emotion these records and their consequences can evoke and to consider how our societies tell adoptees to find their identities in the legal frameworks through which their current lives come into being. In the words of a Western "God," she instructs herself: "Countries are made for the named./Look at your identification papers. Look" (p. 43).

6 Anne J. Gilliland, "A Matter of Life or Death: A Critical Examination of the Role of Official Records and Archives in Supporting the Agency of the Forcibly Displaced," in "Critical Archival Studies," ed. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 16.